

TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT

Fiscal Year 2004

Several kinds of major changes emerged during Fiscal Year 2004, with financial challenges remaining constant, or worse, from last year.

One issue that seemed to have faded from the spotlight was parking, including the Boltwood Walk Parking Garage. Both the garage and the parking system seemed to be functioning well and were self-supporting, despite continued underutilization of the parking garage except at the busiest times of downtown activity.

The highlight of the summer was the collaboration among the Town, Schools and Tritons swim team to revitalize public use of the Middle School pool beginning in September rather than closing it, which had been threatened during the previous budget process. This effort both continued collaboration that had begun more than a year earlier with respect to Community Field and, in retrospect, foreshadowed even more joint management of Town and School facilities.

Town/Gown events also highlighted the year, beginning in the fall. The Town saw major improvements in the University's attention to student behavior issues, under the leadership of Vice-Chancellor Michael Gargano, as responses to students' fall parties and their reactions to a dramatic Red Sox-Yankees playoff series served to calm the spring party season (as well as reactions to the coming year's Red Sox triumph). A new Town/Gown agreement was signed, containing no significant specifics but representing a continued spirit of mutual respect and collaboration.

Personnel issues were in the forefront during much of the year, signaling the beginning of a major change in positions of high visibility. Jennifer Gundersen was promoted to Lieutenant, the first woman to reach a command staff rank in the Amherst Police Department. Anna Maciaszek was promoted to Town Clerk, yet another woman who began her tenure with the Town in a support role and earned several promotions leading to a department head position. But the flood tide of changes began when the Select Board authorized early retirement benefits that had been made available by the state as a way of saving money in tight financial times. Several department heads and others who had been vital elements of Town services and administration for many years chose to take advantage of that benefit and leave the Town: Human Resources Director Kay Zlogar, Conservation Director Peter Westover, Director of Administration and Finance Nancy Maglione, Collector/Treasurer Norma Lynch, Maintenance Director Ned Markert, Senior Center Social Services Director Barbara Slovin. All continued on a part-time basis to ease the Town's transition. Adding to the transition were the resignations, later in the year, of Council on Aging Director John Clobridge and Planning Director Bob Mitchell. A future change was also announced, as the Town Manager and Select Board agreed to a new, three-year contract for the Manager, ending in June 2006, which the Manager indicated would be his last.

The policy leadership of the Town and supervision of the Manager also changed, as Robie Hubley replaced Eddy Goldberg on the Select Board in October and Gerry Weiss replaced Dolly Jolly in March. Anne Awad became the Chair of the Select Board, also in March.

Despite all of those changes, the Fiscal Year 2005 budget process was the major issue of Fiscal Year 2004, as state revenue shortfalls (resulting from the continued economic downturn and the

impact of state and federal tax cuts) limited increases on local aid, on which the Town has always depended for its fiscal well-being. As it became clear that the budget situation would be even worse than in the previous year, the collaboration among Select Board, School Committee, Library Trustees and Finance Committee (and their administrators, and their counterparts in the other three towns in the Region) became even better than in the previous year. The major result of that process was approval of a \$2 million Proposition 2½ override at the Annual Town Election in March. As difficult as preparations of “No Override” budgets were (in case an override was not approved), the override vote avoided an even more gut-wrenching Town Meeting consideration of unprecedented budget cuts. Public transportation took unavoidable hits, with service cutbacks and new fares; but the Town found ways, with the help of UMass Transit’s Al Byam and the Public Transportation Committee, to mitigate some of the impacts, at least for one more year.

Town Meeting was not without a major issue to be decided. Downtown sidewalks replaced the parking garage as the issue which aroused the most passionate disagreements. Town Meeting approved a \$250,000 Select Board substitute for a \$1.2 million proposal that was recommended by many boards and committees. The issue would not end with that Town Meeting.

As FY 04 ended, it was clear that the Town would be facing a period of major adjustments in the coming year, with a “new” Select Board, major transition among department heads, another Charter vote, and yet another difficult budget process.

Barry L. Del Castilho, Town Manager